

Remarks on the 175th Anniversary of the Departure of the Sisters of Mercy for America

As we gather today to commemorate and honor the Carlow Seven, as they are proudly called here, or simply The Seven, when speaking of them in Pittsburgh, as we speak of them in the collective, it's important to remember that these were seven individuals - each with her own story, her own pain in leaving Carlow, her own zeal and talents carried across the sea. In that spirit, I'd like to begin by lingering with each of them for a moment.

Josephine Cullen, age 28, was a cultured woman with administrative abilities, a charming simplicity and a talent for teaching adults. She was chosen by the community to lead the Pittsburgh foundation but that decision was countermanded by the bishop in favor of Frances Warde's experience in making foundations. In Pittsburgh, Josephine took her talent for teaching adults into the jail until a long buried law restraining "gentle women of a religious persuasion" from entering its precincts.

In 1845, she opened Saint Xavier's Academy in Latrobe, Pennsylvania. Two years later she returned to Pittsburgh to work with orphans. Her next ministerial endeavor was at the newly founded Mercy Hospital where she was administrator as well as admissions officer, bookkeeper, and supervisor of the dispensary.

The community history says that she endeared herself to the people of the city and, at her death, each mourned her as a personal friend. Mr. Andrew Fulton presented a bell in her honor which still rings out the Angelus at the convent. Josephine died in 1852 at the age of 37.

Philomena Reid was 23 when the group set off for Pittsburgh. Her mother didn't want her to come but the sisters made a novena to Saint Philomena and Mrs Reid relented. Philomena lived for only two years in Pittsburgh and we are told that she taught "continual piano lessons" - almost up to the day of her death. She was the first of the new community to die.

Aloysia and Elizabeth Strange were blood sisters as well as sisters in religion. They had a fine education which suited them well for the educational roles they played in their new city. Aloysia assisted Josephine Cullen in the establishment of Saint Xavier Academy and was its first director. She had a great zeal for the education of little boys.

Elizabeth had a remarkable memory and wit. She illuminated community manuscripts, translated spiritual books from French to English and wrote sketches on the lives of the saints for the local Catholic paper. In America, she taught in the schools in Pittsburgh

and at Saint Xavier's. Children were attracted to her kindness and she loved taking them on long walks because she had a keen appreciation of nature and of the benefits of walking.

Elizabeth occasionally ventured forth from Pittsburgh. She spent a year in Buffalo, New York assisting with that foundation and helped to establish a school in Hollidaysburg, Pennsylvania. She contributed sketches. She visited the sisters nursing at the military hospital in Washington, DC during the Civil War and made a trip back to Ireland to recruit new sisters for Pittsburgh.

Elizabeth was the longest lived of the seven, dying at the age of 81. At her funeral, the Bishop remarked, "...She was a woman of incessant activity, her interest in public affairs never flagged, her manner earnest, her mind scholarly, her address simple and so straightforward that it was impossible to mistake her motives. The strong laborer, the failing invalid, the convict, the priest, the sinner, the saint, were on terms of intimacy and claimed a bond of sympathy with this ideal Sister of Mercy.

Veronica McDarby was the only member of the Carlow community who didn't volunteer for Pittsburgh but she came as an obedience. For forty years, she served the community as portress. While she didn't venture out into the city for her ministry, the city came to her. Her warmth and Irish wit enveloped all who rang the convent bell. She took great interest in the young girls who worked at the convent, showing them a mother's love. At her death it was noted that she never lost her patience or self control but spoke sweetly and soothingly to each person who came to the door. At her death in 1881, there was public mourning in the city for her loss.

Agatha O'Brien was, at 21, the youngest of the seven missionaries and came to Pittsburgh as a postulant. For lack of a dowry, she had entered as a lay sister but, when the time came, Bishop O'Connor insisted on professing her as a choir sister noting that she was "capable of ruling a nation, and why should the Order be deprived of the services she could render it because her father was a poor man in Ireland?"

Agatha had a great business sense and appreciation for property values and she was unashamed to appeal for means to acquire what was needed. When Frances Warde led the founding party to Chicago in 1846, she took Agatha and left her there as the first superior. Eight years later, she and three other sisters died of cholera in the same weekend. She was 32 years old.

I have saved Frances Warde for last - this absolutely amazing woman described as "sprightly, eager, independent and queenly" with an administrative genius and a "thoroughly feminine aggressiveness." She was the first superior of Saint Leo's in Carlow. From there she made several foundations and, in 18143, was named leader of the Pittsburgh foundation. At the suggestion of Bishop Michael O'Connor who had

recruited the sisters for his new diocese in the United States, the sisters travelled in secular clothes, lest the salt spray play havoc with the starched parts of their habits. They wore black cashmere dresses. Six wore white tulle bonnets with white ribbons. Frances, however, wore a black lace bonnet with lavender ribbons - a hint, perhaps, of the zest with which she undertook this mission.

Once in Pittsburgh, Frances founded Saint Mary's Academy which still exists as the Campus School of Carlow University. She started a lending library, founded the first Mercy Hospital in the world, and ransomed slaves. Though she only lived in Pittsburgh for seven years, when the city celebrated its bicentennial the Western Pennsylvania Historical Society named her one of the ten most influential women in the history of the city.

When her time of leadership in Pittsburgh came to an end, she responded to a request for a foundation in Manchester, New Hampshire and she then made Manchester her home. For the rest of her life she expended her zeal for Mercy by travelling the length and breadth of the United States founding Mercy convents and institutions - 106 in number. Theresa Austin Carroll, in early history of the sisters in the U.S. say that "there is no woman to whom the church in the United States owes more than it does to Frances Warde."

Now that we know who these women were and what they contributed to the building of the church in Pittsburgh and throughout the United States, I'd like to go back to the moment we celebrate today - November 4, 1843, the day of their departure from Carlow. Listen to this entry from the annals of Saint Leo's Convent for that day.

"On the day of their departure from Carlow, Bishop Haley, with priests from the Cathedral and from the College and nearby parishes, accompanied by a great multitude of parents, friends, and the poor, came processionally toward the convent. As they approached, the doors of Saint Leo's swung open, and, led by the Mother Superior, the seven missionaries silently came down the steps followed by the weeping community, and stepped into two coaches awaiting them. At once the procession moved on, the two carriages of the seven moved slowly behind the procession. All along the way psalms were chanted, hymns were sung, and litanies recited. When the town limits had been reached the procession halted, the people stepped aside so that the two coaches could draw up before the bishop, who now gave a parting blessing and signaled the coaches to move on alone. Suddenly the air was rent with the cries of weeping parents and friends."

The emotion inherent in this passage is palpable, as is the courage and generosity of these women, leaving behind all they had ever known and loved in order to carry the Mercy of God to an unknown land and people. Today, I look at you, and I realize that the generosity and courage were not only in the seven but in the town they left behind as well. We sometimes hear that it takes a village to

raise a child. It took a village, this village, not only to raise these seven missionaries but to release them for the service to which they were called. I've always been particularly touched by the particular mention of the poor among the procession of family and friends - the poor who would most keenly feel the loss of their presence and ministry. Family and friends mourned their departure as well. Your courage and generosity freed them and opened the way for the spread of Mercy in Pittsburgh and eventually throughout the United States. For my Mercy community in Pittsburgh, for my city and my university, I bear you profound thanks.

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